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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/PPD, NEA/P, AND IIP/G/NEA

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SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: HAMAS VICTORY, AMERICANS INSULTING ISLAM, CONTINUED DANISH CARTOONS CONTROVERSY

1. Summary: The Omani Internet message board "al-Sablah" is the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language forum for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, this popular site nevertheless offers a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

-- Hamas Victory's Implications for U.S.- Omani Relations
-- Allegations of Americans Insulting Islam
-- Continuing Discussion of Danish Cartoons

End summary.

Allegations of Americans Insulting Islam

2. Al-Sabla reported multiple allegations of Americans insulting Islam. Incidents mentioned were: 1) A Texas movie theater showing a pornographic film about the Prophet Mohammad, entitled "Mohammad's Sexual Life." 2) A priest in St. Lewis Missouri saying that the Muslim God is different than the Christian one, because the Christian God will not turn his followers into terrorists trying to blow up other people. 3) A California television announcer who said that Muslims performing the pilgrimage looked like a herd of sheep. Al-Sablah participants called for action by Muslims to defend Islam and the Prophet Mohammad from "the hate campaign conducted by the West." One participant said that "The West has always hated Muslims and Islam, and the notion of freedom of expression is just a lie." These topics generated 1,517 hits and 25 responses.

Calls to Boycott Danish Products Intensify

3. As discussion of the Danish cartoons continued, many participants urged Omanis to intensify their economic boycott of Danish products. Another posted the apology the Danish newspaper issued on the Al-Jazeera satellite television station, apologizing for suggesting that the cartoons should be protected under freedom of expression. A different participant reported on Afghan President Karzai's statement, made in his meeting with the Danish Prime Minister, that "as a Muslim I am fully satisfied with the apology." Also posted was a comment from former U.S. President Bill Clinton at the Doha economic conference, where he remarked that "There is another wave sweeping the world, similar to anti-Semitism. Anti-Islamism is unacceptable."

Anti-Danish Sermons?

4. Members of al-Sabla advocated including criticism of Danish cartoons deemed derogatory to Islam in Friday mosque sermons. A member commented that "Friday sermons help a great deal in educating Muslims about different aspects of life. They have great influence on Muslims' reaction to certain issues, so our Imams should include criticism of Danish matters in the sermons."

5. Many commented that "many Arab countries have recalled their ambassadors, closed their embassies, publicized the news on television and staged demonstrations. Oman is the only one that has not done anything." In addition, the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate, Sheikh Ahmed Al-Khalili, when asked about boycotting Danish products in an Omani television interview said that an "economic boycott is the minimum Muslims can take to defend themselves." Many al-Sablah members doubted the likelihood of including the issue in Friday sermons, with one post stating that "as all of us know, the mosque Imams follow rules provided to them by the ministry of religious affairs. They cannot violate these, and so will not be able to address the Danish issue unless the government permits them to do so." This topic generated 935 hits and 37 responses.

Comparison between Danish and American Boycotts

6. There has been speculation about why the Danish boycott is so much stronger than the ongoing boycott of American goods, at a

time when American policy is so unpopular among Muslims and Arabs. Part of the explanation is widespread appreciation for American humanitarian aid, cultural programming, and also the fact that the American government has not directly defamed Islam or the Prophet Mohammed as the Danish cartoons have done.

Overheard remarks from Omanis are:

"Although the Americans are following policies that we don't accept in supporting Israel or the war against Afghanistan and Iraq, they are providing a huge amount of aid to most of the countries in the world."

"While it is true that America is killing or supporting the killing of Muslims in Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan, [the Danish] offense against the Prophet Mohammad affects Muslims directly. Mohammad is dearer to us than anyone, even our own children."

"At least the Americans offer a lot of good things: they provide aid, conduct developmental projects, Fulbright scholarships, and many other projects. In contrast, we have not seen anything from Denmark except the dumping of their products in our markets."

The Effect of Hamas' Victory on Omani-American Relations

17. The victory of Hamas prompted speculation by al-Sablah participants about what effect it will have on the Sultanate's relations with the Palestinians and with the U.S. Many thought that Omani reaction would be tied to the American one because of the close relations between the two countries. One member commented that "America might threaten to stop its aid to Palestine if Hamas controls the new government. Oman will want to protect its relations with America, so it will be very careful about how it deals with Hamas in order to avoid jeopardizing relations with America." Some members distinguished between governments' actions and citizens' reactions towards the Hamas victory. One commented, "We hope that the new Palestinian government will increase our feeling of belonging to the Arab nation." The topic generated 627 hits and 20 responses.

BALTIMORE